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ABSTRACT

An autobiography class at Elizabethtown College (Pennsylvania) used one of its four technique paper assignments to focus on the exploratory essay, since the concept of exploration, simply for the sake of questioning, probing, and testing, has both validity and purpose in a class or assignment focusing on autobiography. First the class brainstormed for prewriting on each person's topic; then drafts were evaluated by peers. In the papers, students explored knotty relations with their parents, siblings, former and current friends, why they were more creative and less logical than their parents wanted them to be, etcetra. The students were not afraid to face the issues of their lives, and they were not afraid to share them with the class. The only thing the students could not do was to leave the essays open-ended, to continue questioning. When asked about the assignment, students offered the following ideas: keep the class small; keep the exploratory essay the first one of the semester; stress the open-endedness of the assignment; and provide a model to follow. (PRA)

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE EXPLORATORY ESSAY

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE EXPLORATORY ESSAY

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I am the lucky one on this panel who teaches an advanced writing course entitled "Autobiography." At Elizabethtown College, we have an English major in Professional Writing which offers such courses as Writing for Government and Judiciary, Writing for Publication, Writing for the Health Professions, Humor Writing, and Technical Writing among others. In addition, students must take a core of literature courses: History of the English Language, one author course, two period courses, one genre course, and one American course. Autobiography has the unique distinction in our curriculum of counting as either a literary genre course or a professional writing elective, whatever the student needs to fill a major requirement. Consequently, Autobiography is a hybrid course at Elizabethtown, covering such topics as the tenuous relationship between fiction and autobiography, autobiography as literature, autobiography as historical artifact, and the writing techniques autobiographers use to craft their stories. What I'm going to share with you today is an experiment I tried this semester (September 1990) with showing the students in my autobiography class a technique called the exploratory essay.

I first encountered the concept of the exploratory essay in a *College English* article by William Zeiger entitled "The Exploratory Essay: Enfranchising the Spirit of Inquiry in

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College Composition." Zeiger begins by analyzing Montaigne's essays and how students of the time were taught to write according to classical guidelines for exploration:

> . . . they were exploratory in the sense that they exercised the student's ability to manipulate and examine an idea, to invent arguments, to hit upon effective illustrations, to 'find the available means of persuasion'" (455).

As teachers of writing we have been taught to show students how to write from their own experiences. When we do teach exploration and discovery, we teach students how to use that process usually only in prewriting techniques such as freewriting and brainstorming. Then we show students how to use those experiences to construct an argument, how to take a stand on an issue and support it, how to prove a point; the list goes on and we all recognize it. Rarely, however, do we teach our students how to use writing to explore simply for the sake of exploration. Rarely, do we teach exploration as an end in and of itself--as a technique that needs no further justification.

Zeiger highlights the fact that,

> [n]o doubt we as composition teachers extol to our students the need to research a topic carefully and to scrutinize a question from all sides; we even sit in conference over preliminary drafts. But as long as the goal and end product of writing are to demonstrate the validity of a thesis, the implicit message is that <u>proving</u> is more important than <u>finding out</u>. (458)

It seems to me that in a class or an assignment focusing on autobiography, wherein students are asked to tell us about and comment on their lives, the concept of exploration, simply for the sake of questioning, probing, and testing, has both validity and purpose in the composition classroom. The familiar, open form of the essay is so unlike what we normally teach, and so unlike what students have been asked to submit for 14-16 years, that it becomes a difficult task for some students and teachers, myself included, because of its very foreignness.

The reason I chose to assign the exploratory essay in my autobiography class is because I had experienced the freedom it can give to a writer when I was working on a seminar paper for a graduate course on rhetoric and literature taught by Jim Corder. For that course he, too, wrote a paper which is now published in a collection of essays edited by Chris Anderson, entitled Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy. Corder's article explores the paradox of the kinds of writing we require of freshmen, i.e. the theme, while we rarely, if ever, are allowed to consider the essay as a true literary form, worthy of literary and rhetorical analysis. Thus I decided that my hybrid autobiography course at Elizabethtown College was perfect for my exploration of the equal importance of literary nonfiction and open-ended familiar essays for the rhetorical study of writing and literature.

THE ASSIGNMENT

I gave the assignment this semester as the first technique paper of four my autobiography students were to write. In addition, they complete a 20-25 page autobiography at the end of the semester and have essay midterm and final exams. We read five complete autobiographies (both fictional and nonfictional) and a group of selected readings focusing on writing techniques used by a variety of autobiographers from Malcolm X to Annie Dillard, from Margaret Mead to George Orwell.

The short technique papers are four to five typed pages long, and the four assignments are exploratory essay, a collection of short one- to two-page beginnings, plot development through dialogue, and Winston Weathers' Grammar B as outline in *An Alternate Style*. I told the students that they might want to begin by exploring an event in the same way they might in a journal, a diary, or a letter. The things I wanted them to consider while writing were questioning the event(s), what caused it, why did it affect their lives, and how or why they chose to write about this particular event. I stressed the open-ended nature of the paper. I stressed that they should focus on the questions, not necessarily the answers; they should let the questions lead to other questions.

For prewriting in class we brainstormed as a class on each person's chosen topic. Class members interviewed each writer trying to bring details to the surface of memory and trying to give them more questions and areas to explore. For drafts in

peer evaluation, the guidance I gave reviewers was to consider the vividness of the detail and what kinds of places, both internally and externally, did the memory and its retelling take the writer.

The papers I received were wonderful. The students explored knotty relations with their parents, siblings, former and current friends, why they were more creative and less logical than their parents wanted them to be, their forts reaction to someone with a severe mental handicap, etc. These students were not afraid to face the issues of their lives, and they were not afraid to share them with the class. The only thing the students could not bring themselves to do was to leave the essays open-ended, to continue questioning. The all, without exception, felt compelled to come to a conclusion, to make a decision about their lives. They couldn't reach the next level of questioning. They succumbed to the years of training and proved their points.

THE STUDENTS' RESPONSE

When I told my class two days ago that I would be delivering this presentation, I asked them what advice they would have me give to you in an effort to try the same assignment. Here are some of their comments and my responses to them:

(1) "I think this paper and this class would be very difficult with more students than we have in the class."

The class has only thirteen students: one elementary education major, one math major/English minor, and eleven

English/professional writing majors. I can tell you the class is a real joy. I wholeheartedly agree with their assessment, and that is why all our advanced professional writing classes are limited to sixteen students; though I believe, it could work with as many as twenty students in a seminar setting.

(2) Some of them suggested that the exploratory essay not be the first one of the semester. Others disagreed, saying that the exploration enabled them to work on memories more easily throughout the semester.

I agree with the dissenters, for that was one of my goals.

(3) They all agreed that I should have stressed more the open-endedness of the assignment. Some suggested that perhaps I even go so far as to require that they not conclude their papers, forcing them to fight against the need to find an answer, to fight again the need to have closure.

I agree that I should work longer and harder stressing the nebulous nature of the "completed" piece, but I am reluctant to require no conclusion for the advanced writers because I had hoped some of them at least would learn how to conclude the writing without answering the questions they set out to solve, or at least accept that it isn't *always* necessary or desirable.

(4) They all agreed they would have liked to have a model to follow, an example. It did not matter if it were a

"professional writer's" piece or a student piece. They all wanted structure to the open-endedness.

I resist the urge to give them a model or sample exploration because I don't want all their explorations to sound like someone else's. I want their essays to be just as unique as they were this time, but without the need to tie everything up neatly in the end for the teacher. I want them to break into their own explorations, with minimal guidelines. Perhaps I can be convinced otherwise, but they are too reliant on models for my taste.

MY ASSESSMENT

I agree with most of what they said. I don't see the assignment and the results as a failure, either. Even though they seemed to be unable to suspend conclusions, they went through the exploration process in class and out of class. Just because they couldn't represent that totally on paper the first time they tried, I don't see that as failure. Next time, I will probably either have them try two exploratory essays or have them revise the first one later in the semester to give them more chances to work on this technique.

As I said earlier, these papers were some of the most interesting, most real, most authentic writing I've ever gotten from students, a trend that has continued throughout all the technique papers this semester. I can't wait to read their longer works at the end of the term. They promise to be just as

high quality. Whatever they did this semester, and whatever small part I or this assignment may have had, this time I received beautifully written papers. I hope it works next time, and I hope you'll try it sometime too.

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